

**How I Taught Bob Dylan and What He Taught Me: An Interdisciplinary Teaching
Experience**

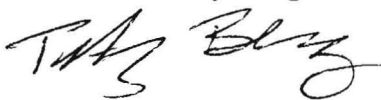
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Timothy Berg', written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

While literature and history are two distinct fields, they are not entirely independent of each other. Literature/art and history build off of each other and to fully understand either field, they must be studied in conjunction. The historical setting in which a piece of art is created leaves an indelible mark upon the creation, just as the creation permanently influences history. To examine this relationship, my partner and I decided to study the career of Bob Dylan, a musician who influenced/was influenced by the turbulent atmosphere of the 1960 s. This project took the form of a ten week long Honors Colloquium that my partner and I team taught. By teaching a class rather than writing a research paper, I was able to not only study the interdependence of literature and history, but I was able to experiment with different, interdisciplinary teaching techniques, which themselves helped to illuminate the relationship between these two fields.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Berg for supervising this project. I would also like to thank my co-instructor Ben Purcell, and all the students who took our class. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

Author's Statement

As an English literature major with a minor in history, I have frequently observed the relationship between these two fields, and have come to realize the importance of studying these subjects together. This presents a challenge, however, for these are still two distinct fields with separate teaching ideologies. The purpose of this thesis project was to examine not only the relationship between history and literature, but to examine how this relationship would influence the pedagogy used in a class on this subject.

To accomplish this, my partner (Ben Purcell) and I decided to design and teach a class about Bob Dylan. The reason we chose to study Bob Dylan is that he encapsulates all aspects of the project. He is a well respected musician who is undeniably linked to the historic time period in which he first became popular (the 1960s). Not only is he linked to the 1960s, but his work is also influenced by previous generations, demonstrating how history and context can influence literature/art. Dylan is also known for his poetic lyrics and for the literary references that permeate many of his songs. This style of writing and composition not only manifests the relationship between history and literature, but also blurs the line between the different mediums of art. This allowed us to explore issues such as the difference between songs and poetry, the relationship between an artist, the art, and the audience, and how these issues factored into the history/literature relationship.

Ben and I began planning for the class during the fall semester of our senior year. We started by deciding on some basic ideas about the structure of the class. We decided the class should be mainly discussion based, with short lectures and readings to provide the historical context. From there, Ben and I discussed how the class should be organized. We eventually chose to organize it chronologically rather than topically, starting at the beginning of Bob

Dylan's career and working through the '60s. We chose the chronological setup because we wanted to observe how history influenced and shaped Bob Dylan's career (and vice versa), so we thought it important to follow Dylan's career according to its natural development.

After choosing an organization scheme, we had to decide the nature of the assignments and how the grading would work. We decided to have the students complete a weekly journal response, analyzing the listening and reading material for the week. We also chose to have the students write a short research paper for a midterm, and to do either a creative project or a longer paper for a final (see assignment sheets and syllabus for specific details). We assigned the journals in the hopes that they would help the students organize their thoughts and prepare for class discussion, and the paper and projects as a way to measure how much the students learned during the class.

After deciding upon some basic assignments, Ben and I began to select what material to include. As the colloquium was only going to be ten weeks long, we decided to only cover the 1960's, which gave us nine albums to work with. From the first album, we chose to have the students listen to "Song to Woody," "Talkin' New York Blues," and "Who Killed Davey Moore," as well as "This Land is Your Land," "All You Fascists," "Pretty Boy Floyd," and "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues," by Woody Guthrie. We decided to include the Guthrie material because he had a lasting impact on Bob Dylan, and is a concrete example of how history can influence the development of literature.

After touching on Dylan's origins and influences, we moved on to study his topical songs. We focused primarily on songs dealing with the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, such as "Oxford Town," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "Only a Pawn in Their Game," and "Masters of War." We also assigned readings from the book *The Times Were*

Changing, by Debbie and Irwin Unger. This book contained various primary source documents relating to the major events of the 1960's, including speeches, government briefs, and manifestos. We assigned these readings to provide the historical context surrounding the songs. We were then able to examine not only how the history affected the development of the song, but also how the songs influence our perception of the history.

After these topical songs, we decided to examine songs from *Bringing it All Back Home*. We also had the students read some French Symbolist poetry, including poems by Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Baudelaire. The object of this pairing was to observe and attempt to understand the shifting style of Dylan's music. We also decided to read selections from the Beat era authors, such as Kerouac and Burroughs, so as to compare how Dylan's development interacted with these counterculture movements.

Following *Bringing it All Back Home*, we studied songs from *Highway 61 Revisited*. This album enabled us to study the relationship between an artist, his art, and the audience. We also included "An Open Letter to Bob Dylan," by Irwin Silber, the editor of *Sing Out* to demonstrate the disconnect between Dylan and his fans that occurred after he went electric. Dylan's fans still saw him as a folk musician and wanted him to be a voice for the antiwar movement, but he was ready to move on. This conflict clearly demonstrates how historical setting can shape how art is perceived, as well as raises questions as to the artist's responsibility to that setting. We finished up the class by listening to selections from throughout Dylan's entire career. We did this so as to gain a sense of how Dylan transformed over time and how he continued to relate to his early experiences and influences.

From this class, I learned many things about the process of teaching. The most important thing I learned was the necessity of clear communication, both with the students and with any

co-instructors. It was sometimes difficult to make sure that Ben, Dr. Berg, and I were all informed of what was going on, and this lack of communication hindered my ability to be fully prepared. Communication with the students is also important, but comes with a different set of challenges. Rather than just staying in touch with each other, the main obstacle in communicating with the students is realizing that not all people think in the same manner. There were students from all different majors in the course, so while one explanation of a song/text would make the connection clear to certain students, other pupils would still be confused. I realized that to be an effective teacher, it is necessary to be able to process information in a variety of ways. This also influenced how I prepared for each class, for rather than coming up with only one list of questions, I would attempt to come up with multiple questions for each point. If one question didn't seem to be helping the students, I would rephrase or use one of the backup questions to see if taking it in a slightly different direction would be more in line with their thought processes.

On the last day of class, students presented their projects or papers, and filled out a short survey in which I asked the students questions about how the class was run. The questions I asked were:

- 1) Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?
- 2) Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?
- 3) Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?
- 4) General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

Of the students who completed the survey, the majority (10) thought that the comments given back on the journals were helpful and that they were able to improve from week to week. Only two students said the comments were not helpful at all, and the two remaining students said

that while the comments were helpful, it would have been more helpful to have more direction for the journals. For the second question, eight students preferred the large group discussions, four preferred the small group activities, and two preferred to use both methods.

The answers I received to the third question were surprising, and seemed to highlight the difficulty of trying to simultaneously teach literature and history. While virtually every student said the amount of structure was fine, almost everyone also said they would have liked either more variety or more lectures. From my experience in the classroom, I also think that more lectures to expound upon the historical settings would have been helpful. Given the ten week time restraint, however, it would have been almost impossible to provide an adequate amount of lecture and still provide time for discussion.

This difficulty in balancing the lectures with the discussions helps illuminate the nature of the relationship between history and literature. Just as the lectures/history were more fact based and recounted what was physically going on at the time, the discussions/literature were space to interpret these events and their impacts. Just as the students needed the background information in lectures to be able to analyze and more fully understand Dylan's works, history and literature need each other to make their meanings clear. Since history is not only the events that occurred, but also how future generations interpret those events, literature and other forms of art and communication (paintings, songs, novels, newspapers, etc) are vital to understanding our past. Since we are not able to witness past events firsthand, we must use some kind of medium to relate to these events, whether it be art, literature, or scholarly works. This demonstrates how literature can influence the development of history, for even the pieces written during the time period reflect the creator's *interpretation* of what is going. This is why it is simultaneously important to have knowledge of the events themselves, for an artist may present only a biased

view. If we were to judge the Vietnam War, for example, based simply off of Dylan's topical songs, it would seem as if it was an entirely unpopular, evil war. Studying scholarly works that attempt to avoid bias, however, reveals that this is not necessarily true. The majority of the country, in fact, supported the Vietnam War, especially in the early years. This knowledge not only affects our view of history, but it changes our views of Dylan's topical songs. Even for pieces that don't directly deal with current events, it is impossible for anyone to completely remove themselves from the context in which they live, and therefore history will always have some kind of impact on art/literature. Without knowledge of history then, we are unable to fully understand the literature, just as we cannot understand history without literature.

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HONORS 390: Bob Dylan and his lyrics in the 1960s

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Faculty Advisor:

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Text: http://www.erowid.org/library/books_online/times_were_changin.pdf

Course Description

This course will look at the relationship between Bob Dylan and the culture of the 1960s, with a particular focus on how this relationship is manifested through his lyrics. How do Dylan's lyrics influence our perception of the historical events they describe? How does our knowledge of the history behind the songs affect our listening experience? What role does an artist play in developing history? Do artists have a responsibility to their historical circumstances? These are just a few of the questions we will explore through Dylan's influences, both literary and historical.

Special Concerns: If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. The information you need to contact me is given at the top of the first page of this syllabus. If you need to request an accommodation, you must visit the Disabled Student Development Office, Student Center 307, 287-5293 before I am allowed to make that accommodation.

Assignments

Weekly Readings and Listening Assignments- Students will be required to read a number of selections, as well as listen to select songs each week. Readings will come either from our online textbook or will be posted to blackboard or emailed out ahead of time.

Weekly Journal- Each week students will respond to the assigned reading/listening material in a journal of 250-500 words. This journal should examine the issues and themes discussed in class, not simply reflect your opinion on the material. Basic questions to ask in the journals would be: How do the lyrics relate to the readings for the week? What is the relationship between the different songs for that week? How have Dylan's lyrics changed? How does the music affect the lyrics (reading vs. listening) etc. (65%)

Short Paper- You will write a 2-3 page extended journal examining one Dylan song of your choice (does not have to be on syllabus) and its historical/literary influences and its relation to other Dylan songs. (10%)

Final Project- Examine an artist outside Bob Dylan and their literary/historical impact. More specific information will be provided later. (25%)

The Writing Center: The Writing Center is where students, faculty, and staff at Ball State turn for writing support. Since 1966, we have helped thousands of Ball State writers through free one-to-one feedback sessions, workshops, presentations, writing communities, and online resources for writers. If you are working on a writing project and are looking for individualized feedback, consider making an appointment for a free one-to-one tutoring session. Students may meet for tutoring in Robert Bell 291 or online for their sessions. Phone: 285-8387. Email: writing@bsu.edu.

Policies

Attendance- As this is only a ten week class, attendance is crucial. Any more than two unexcused absences will result in a grade deduction. Chronic tardiness will also have a negative impact on your grade, so please talk to one of us if you are going have a problem arriving on time.

Technology- The use of laptops during class is allowed. Much of our material will be coming from the internet, so be sure to either print copies of the readings out or bring a laptop to view them during class. The use of other technologies, such as cell phones, will not be permitted during class.

Academic Dishonesty: You are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. Please refer to Section VII and other applicable sections of the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities for information about what constitutes academic dishonesty. If you have questions about whether something is academic dishonesty, please consult with your instructors.

Schedule

1/12: Introduction, etc.

1/19

Read: Excerpt from *Bound for Glory* by Woody Guthrie, *Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie* by Bob Dylan, *TTWC* pgs. 13-21

Listen: "This Land is Your Land," "All You Fascists," "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" by Woody Guthrie; "Song to Woody," "Talkin' New York," "Who Killed Davey Moore?" by Bob Dylan

1/26

Read: *TTWC* pgs. 89-92, 98-110; John Lewis's speech from the March on Washington

Listen: "Oxford Town," "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "Only a Pawn in Their Game" by Bob Dylan; African American Civil Rights music

2/3

Read: *TTWC* pgs. 183-200; Excerpt from "Wichita Vortex Sutra" by Allen Ginsberg; "Go Away You Bomb" by Bob Dylan, Excerpt from Dylan interview with Studs Terkel

Listen: "Masters of War," "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" by Bob Dylan

2/10

Read: "Lightning," "Sensation" by Arthur Rimbaud; "Correspondences" by Charles Baudelaire; "Poetic Art," "Out Walking" by Paul Verlaine; Excerpt from "The Making of the Counterculture" by Kenneth Rexroth

Listen: "Chimes of Freedom," "Mr. Tambourine Man," "It's Alright Ma" by Bob Dylan; "Mr. Tambourine Man" by The Byrds

2/17

Read: Excerpts from *The Subterraneans* by Jack Kerouac and *Interzone* by William S. Burroughs; Liner Notes to *Bringing it All Back Home*; "The Vandals took the Handles" from *Tarantula*; Relationship between music/lyrics

Listen: "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm," "Like a Rolling Stone," "Tombstone Blues" by Bob Dylan; "Too Much Monkey Business," "Roll Over Beethoven" by Chuck Berry

2/24

Read: "An Open Letter to Bob Dylan" by Irwin Silber; Excerpts from Dylan interview with John Cohen and Happy Traum; Liner Notes from *Highway 61 Revisited*; "Children of Our Era" by Wislawa Szymborska; From *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser

Listen: "My Back Pages," "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Desolation Row," by Bob Dylan

3/1

Read: *TTWC* 64-73, 215-220, 249-259

Listen: Various songs from throughout early albums, *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*

SPRING BREAK 3/4 to 3/11

3/15

TBA

3/22

TBA

Final Project

For the final, write a paper (4-6 pages) that examines an entire album by Bob Dylan. There are no requirements for sources, but students are encouraged to locate any outside material that will help in understanding any aspects of the album. This is obviously similar to the first paper assignment, but will cover an entire album instead of a single song. Also like the first assignment, you should look at each song and its lyrics, examining both its musical and literary characteristics. Since you're looking at a whole album, however, you'll want to focus on overall themes/contrasts between the songs and how they work together to create the album. Consider how the songs work together to create a new message or theme that may not be identifiable simply by looking at a single song. Issues to consider include how the album plays into Dylan's growth as an artist, how the album interacts with its historical or literary context, what role did/does the audience play in the development of the album, etc.

If you don't feel like writing another paper, we're open to the idea of a creative project if you have an idea that you feel is relevant to the course or Bob Dylan. Examples of creative projects are creating your own cover version of a Dylan song and explaining why you did it the way you did, creating a music video for a song, writing a poem/short story that is in some way relevant to the class. Another option would be to examine an album, musically and lyrically, from any artist of your choice. If you choose a creative project, you will also be required to submit an "artist's statement" that explains the relevance of your project (two page minimum). If you have questions, as always, feel free to email any of us, we will be happy to give thoughts/advice on paper topics/creative project ideas.

Due: March 22, the last day of class.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

Yes; the comments enabled me to improve on the following assignments

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

Both; I enjoyed starting out in small groups and gathering ideas and then joining the large group to

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more compare structure?

for the majority of the 10 weeks I enjoyed ideas the structure. I would have preferred homework links in a more timely manner; however, overall

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc. it was great!

I enjoyed the course—centered on an artist I knew little about.

I learned a great amount and am truly thankful for all of your hard work and time! 😊

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

Yes

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

Large group discussions

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

Yes

No

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

what ~~it~~ was difficult to know
needed to be improved for an A,

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

large group discussions

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

Yes, there was the correct
amount of structure.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

more listening to music during class

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

Not really. I found it very difficult to write reactions for a grade. Reactions are so personal but it frequently seemed like my "reactions" weren't the "right" ones and my grade suffered.

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

large group

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

Sometimes. Not necessarily structure but more variety in the class would have been nice. The journals got really old after a few weeks.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you? maybe use a rubric

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

Large group

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure? It was cohesive. I think I would have preferred a short lecture then discuss

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc. ➤

I liked the video clips for context

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

For the most part. More direction would be helpful.

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

Large Group Discussions

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

It was! however I wish we would have looked at full albums to get a better overview of Dylan.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

They were helpful. More details would have been better. More orientation -

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

Large group discussions.

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

The class was always organized. We always knew what to expect and

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

the analysis accomplished.

ed to get to now more of s musical end.

e biographical stuff needed.

would have liked to know more out his life. Watching + clips of Dylan's interview to see his super interesting relationship. THANK YOU GUYS!

what our responsibilities were.

And w our pop shoulda improv on wat heeded

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

Yes, the details were helpful, especially the specific examples

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

large group

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

I thought it was organized well, every discussion had a theme

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

The 2 page journals could have more opinion based. I felt I needed to include a lot of facts.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

yes, they helped me improve my future assignments
However, at the beginning there were a few weeks it would have been helpful to have comments from the previous week before ~~starting~~ starting on next week's assignment

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

large group. But both were fine.

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

Yes, it was well structured + organized.
Consistent.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

I liked how expansive your knowledge of Bob Dylan was
The only thing I would've liked is to share your love for it more - your passion! :)
Way to go!

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

The comments were helpful; however, I felt like when I used them I was penalized for something else. Very frustrating & took the enjoyment out of the assignments.

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

The small group activities gave everyone a chance to speak.

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

It was structured but always "after-the-fact" structure. After a few weeks this did improve.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

Class was original & unique. Wasn't what I expected, but went with theme of what the professors' strengths were.

I would have enjoyed learning more about why he was appreciated.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

yes

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

I prefer small group activities in order to have a deeper, more open discussion

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

Yes, the assignments were hard to write (journals) because many readings didn't correspond w/ the themes of the son

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

I liked the final project and the layed back class

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

They were very helpful and insightful

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

Small group discussion

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

Yes! No! - the structure was fine.
A lot of room for discussion.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

I'm not a journal person, and because Dylan is over my head and most others, it was sometimes hard to respond to something unknown every week. I feel like that might just be my general hatred toward journals, but I felt like they suffered through my lack of understanding.

Despite all this - I loved the class. BALLIN!

METIN

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you?

The comments were very helpful. I always looked back at previous week comments when writing my next journal entries.

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?

I enjoy both though I prefer to discuss my opinions in smaller groups.

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

I thought it was organized in a clear manner. Varying the activities each class period was nice.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

I enjoyed the class though by the end I was a bit tired of analyzing his music $\frac{1}{2}$ would have enjoyed listening to a little more music listening.

Survey

- Were the comments on your assignments helpful? If not, how could they have been more helpful to you? *they were very helpful*
Yes, however it was frustrating not receiving feedback every week.

- Did you prefer the large group discussions or the small group activities?
It was nice doing both - it added variety.

- Was the class organized in a clear, cohesive manner? Would you have preferred more structure?

I would have preferred more variety, not necessarily more structure.

- General comments. Things you liked, things that could be improved, etc.

As I said earlier, I would have liked feedback every week because I depended on it to improve my journal every week.

It would have been nice to do more than just journals

I did learn a lot about Dylan + appreciate the insight + I thought we had good discussions.